

# Close Encounters of the Law Enforcement Kind

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I have been working the satellites for almost 10 years, operating from hundreds of different locations across North America (and a few in Australia, during a 2011 trip). When operating in the field, there are times that law enforcement officers will take an interest in my radio activities. Common sense usually is the best way to handle these encounters, along with a little bit of outreach about amateur radio and amateur radio satellites.

Even when I travel around the U.S., I make sure to carry the wallet card form of my amateur radio license. I have never had to show it to anyone, but explaining that I have a license is usually enough to satisfy any law enforcement officer that has asked me about my operating. For those operating outside the U.S., having an official copy of your amateur radio license is sometimes a requirement, so make sure to carry it when traveling overseas with radio gear.

Some have asked me if my equipment can be used to track animals. It can, although I have never used my radios and antennas to do that. I realize that these officers have a job to do, and their job happens to coincide with my radio operating. In almost all cases, these encounters only last a couple of minutes. Only one encounter in the past 10 years lasted longer, as discussed below.

When doing a formal demonstration, I have an AMSAT banner I can display, and flyers/brochures for anyone interested in amateur radio satellites. For other operating, I try to find spots that are not along busy highways, not marked as private property or displaying "NOTRESPASSING" signs, and – hopefully – not full of RF noise. Even if I'm not planning a public demonstration, I am ready to answer questions about my radios and satellite operating.

The first time I encountered law enforcement while working satellites was during an AO-27 pass in September 2009. I parked north

of a highway intersection at the DM23vx/DM24va grid boundary in western Arizona. AO-27 was only available for 7 minutes during afternoon passes over the Northern Hemisphere at that time, which made for some busy passes.

I started working stations from this rarely heard location and had a good rhythm until about 2 ½ minutes into the pass. An Arizona state trooper then approached me. Seeing the trooper driving up, I said, "Uh, one moment please. WD9EWK, highway patrol," and set my Elk antenna down.

The trooper saw me operating from the back of my truck, with its rear gate up, and said that someone called 9-1-1 to report seeing a broken-down vehicle off the highway. The trooper wasn't interested in seeing my driver's license or vehicle registration, but only wanted to make sure I was okay. After assuring him I was fine, the trooper drove off. I was off the radio for a minute, and was able to quickly resume working stations in the remaining 3 ½ minutes of this pass. Later, I took the audio I recorded from AO-27, combined it with photos I took from the area, and made a YouTube video of this pass ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ed7nmXLcwc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ed7nmXLcwc)).

After that 2009 encounter, I have been visited periodically by local, state, or federal law enforcement officers. When I operate from locations near the U.S./Mexico border, almost every one of those activations would come with a visit by U.S. Border Patrol officers. They, like any other law enforcement officers, would check that I am okay, and sometimes stop by while I am in their area just to ensure that everything is fine.

In late 2010, after a visit to southern Arizona, I drove up to a U.S. Border Patrol highway checkpoint. The Border Patrol agent saw my Elk antenna in the back of my truck, along with my radio gear. After asking if I was a U.S. citizen and if anyone else was in the truck with me, the agent asked if I had a minute for a question. Since I was at his checkpoint, I said, "Sure." The agent brought me a Kenwood commercial VHF HT and explained that he bought the radio on eBay. He wanted to program it, and asked if I knew how. I had no idea and explained that there was a lot of information on the Internet about programming two-way radios, and where to get cables used in programming

them. The agent thanked me, and I resumed my drive home.

The longest encounter I ever had with law enforcement happened at the start of the 2014 AMSAT symposium in Baltimore. On the Friday morning of that weekend, I had been working AO-7 and FO-29 passes just after sunrise. As I finished these two passes and was putting my gear away, two police vehicles drove up to surround me and my rental car. These vehicles had "NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY POLICE" on them. I did not realize the NSA had its own police force.

Two officers approached me and asked what I was doing. I explained that I had just been using my radio gear to work a couple of satellites, and the officers then asked me for identification. Along with my driver's license, I had my symposium badge hanging around my neck.

They asked me why I was at the hotel. I explained there were 80 to 100 attendees at the symposium over the weekend and the symposium dealt with amateur radio satellites. As one of the officers called in my information to his dispatcher, a third officer drove up. This officer started asking me about the frequencies and modes I was using. I explained which bands I used, and that I was transmitting in SSB. As I explained my operating, one of the officers wrote down everything I said, and then all three officers returned to one of the police vehicles.

I sat next to my rental car as they discussed my situation. They all returned and assured me I was not breaking any laws or rules by operating at the hotel. They all encouraged me to go up the road away from the area of the hotel, without specifically explaining why. But I had a good idea why given that several office buildings in the area of the hotel were used by the NSA, including a large blockhouse down the street from the hotel with antennas on its roof. In the end, I – along with several other operators – made use of the parking lots at the hotel and a nearby building for more operating during the weekend, and the NSA Police never returned.

My most recent encounter with law enforcement occurred as I was writing this article. On November 7, 2015, I represented AMSAT at a hamfest near Tucson, Arizona. This was a half-day event, and I decided to drive west from Tucson about 120 miles



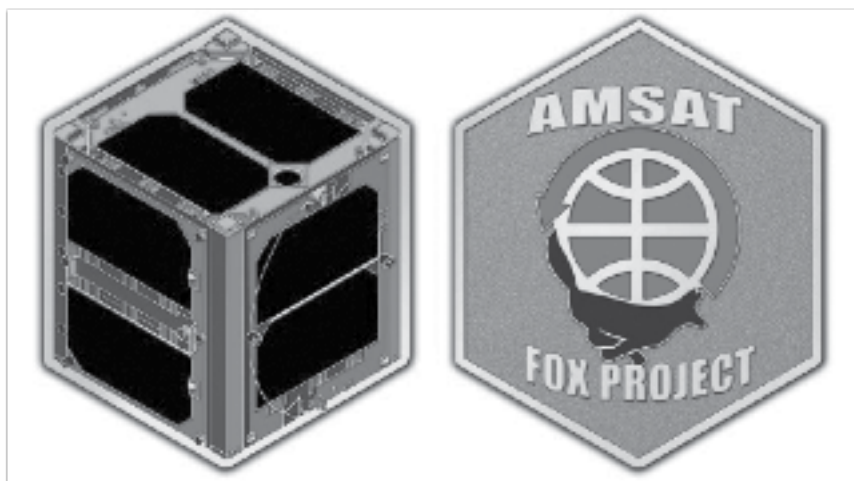
to the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, near the U.S./Mexico border in the rarely-heard grid, DM31. I parked at the monument's visitor center, a few miles north of the border, and operated from there.

After about 90 minutes of operating, a U.S. Park Ranger drove up. The ranger asked if my car was broken down. I explained what I was doing, and we ended up chatting for about 15 minutes. We talked about my radios and amateur radio, along with his job being a federal law enforcement officer near an international border. He never asked to see any of my identification. Although I was not planning to stay there after sunset, the ranger said that the campground behind the visitor center would be a safe place to stay after dark. I did not have any camping gear with me, and planned on heading home in an hour, around sunset (after working passes of SO-50 and XW-2F, as I was there to work satellite passes and hand out contacts with grid DM31). Before the ranger drove off, he wanted to shake my hand. I considered that 15 minutes time well-spent.

In the end, my advice regarding encounters with law enforcement is simple. Don't be afraid of them, as they are just doing a job. Be ready to answer questions, and – if asked – show identification, including your amateur radio license. Most law enforcement officers probably don't know anything about amateur satellites and may have only the vaguest idea about amateur radio. These encounters can be great opportunities to talk about this aspect of amateur radio, while helping the officer/agent gain a better understanding for any future encounters with amateur radio operators. 🌐

**Never too late to work the sats -- Hector (CO6CBF/W5CBF on right) introduces Mark (KE5HSW on left) to the birds. Though a ham for several years, Mark made his first three hamsat contacts while visiting the hamshack.**

**Photo: George Carr, WA5KBH**



## AMSAT Fox-I Challenge Coin Available

A premium collectable is available for qualifying donations to the Fox satellite program. AMSAT has commissioned a unique challenge coin for donors who have contributed at the \$100 level or higher. This challenge coin is shaped as an isometric view of a Fox-I cubesat, complete with details such as the stowed UHF antenna, solar cells, and camera lens viewport. Struck in 3mm thick brass plated with antique silver, and finished in bright enamel, the coin is scaled to be approximately 1:4 scale, or 1 inch along each of the six sides. The reverse has the AMSAT Fox logo.

### Donations may be made via the:

- AMSAT website at [www.amsat.org](http://www.amsat.org)
- FundRazr crowdsourcing app [fnd.us/c/6pz92](http://fnd.us/c/6pz92)
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